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ABSTRACT

The motive to avoid success has been conceptualized as an ambivalence in life-goal directions, particularly characteristic of white college women. The presence or absence of the motive to avoid success was found to interact significantly with two experimental sets of instructions: Difficult vs. Easy (Experiment 1) and Internal vs. External Locus-of-Control (Experiment 2). Women exhibiting the motive to avoid success performed better on Digit Span (Backwards) following Easy and External-Control Instructions while women not exhibiting the motive to avoid success performed better following Difficult and Internal-Control Instructions. (Author)

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The Motive to Avoid Success and Instructional Set[1, 2]

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Motive to avoid success is conceptualized as an ambivalence towards success, for success results in negative as well as positive consequences. Positive consequences might involve parental or peer approval or self-satisfaction, while negative consequences might involve loss of popularity or attractiveness to the opposite sex (Horner, 1968). Motive to avoid success will be particularly characteristic of women who have assimilated society's view that femininity and success are positive by incompatible goals. The high incidence of motive to avoid success in white college women, while varying some from sample to sample, has been repeatedly demonstrated (Horner, 1972; Makosky, 1972; Tresemer, 1973; Patty, 1974). In addition, Horner (1970) cites the cross-sectional research in which motive to avoid success in women increases with year in school, i.e., from junior high through senior year in college. Perhaps women perceive the college years as a cross-road in life-planning between femininity and career-success, thus making the conflict more salient.

Horner (1968) demonstrated that women whose stories contain motive to avoid success (MAS-present women) performed better while not competing with others. In contrast, women whose stories did not contain these themes (MAS-absent women) performed better in competition. Makosky (1972) found that MAS-present women performed better in competition against women and on feminine tasks MAS-absent women performed better when competing against men and on masculine tasks.

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The behavior of the MAS-present women in Makosky's (1972) study can be explained within the theory of the motive to avoid success as originated by Horner (1968). The theory predicts that the tendency to avoid success is likely to be engaged in situations where the consequences of success are very negative, e.g., competing against a man or on tasks labeled as masculine. Conversely, performing well against a woman or on a feminine task is not as likely to engage the tendency to avoid success. Since the increased tendency to avoid success in competition against men and masculine tasks is expected to interfere with the expression of achievement motivation, MAS-present women will perform better against women and feminine tasks. Similarly, MAS-present women will perform well on tasks where the negative consequences of success are minimal, e.g., easy tasks or tasks which say little about their individual ability.

The original theory of the motive to avoid success does not predict that MAS-absent women will perform differently against men and women or on masculine and feminine tasks. Theoretically, MAS-absent women should pursue success regardless of the situation. The question becomes one of asking what variables in the competitive environments cited above facilitate the performance of MAS-absent women. The thesis underlying the present research was that MAS-absent women will excel in situations which are difficult, important, and/or reflections of their individual ability, i.e. those which are personally significant. Since men and masculine tasks are traditionally seen as demanding stiffer competition than women and feminine tasks, any achievement motivation in the MAS-absent women can be expressed. The tendency to avoid success does not interfere with its expression. It is not that

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MAS-absent women are simply atraditional and therefore only motivated by masculine goals (Patty, 1974), but that they follow a traditional pattern in viewing competition against men and on masculine tasks as more challenging. It is therefore predicted that the absence or presence of the motive to avoid success will interact with the two sets of instructions, Difficult vs. Easy and Internal vs. External Locus of Control. MAS-absent women will do better after Difficult and Internal-Control Instructions while MAS-present women will do better after Easy and External-Control Instructions.

Methods

Subjects. One hundred and thirty undergraduate women were recruited from a large introductory course in psychology. Their participation was part of their course requirements. Of the 67 subjects in Experiment I, ten were dropped because their stories were uncodeable, bizarre, or they had cheated on the performance task. For similar reasons, nine subjects were dropped from a total of 63 in Experiment II.

Materials. The motive to avoid success is assessed by a projective technique utilizing a thematic content analysis as in the TAT. Stories are written in response to verbal cues, and any incidence of negative consequences, negative affect, or withdrawal from success is scored as motive to avoid success (Horner, 1968). The only modification of Horner's original scoring procedures was the dropping of subjects who wrote bizarre stories. Inter-judge reliability of two judges independently coding the stories for motive to avoid success themes was .85.

Patty (1974) has developed three additional story cues to supplement the cue used by Horner (1968). The four cues were combined to form two alternate forms each composed of two story cues, and having a split-half reliability of .84. Subjects in Experiments I and II responded only to Form A. Form A contains the original Horner cue, "After first term finals, Anne finds herself at the top of her med school class," and a cue developed by Patty, "Joan while still in high school wins national awards for her science projects." If either judge found evidence of motive to avoid success in either of her stories, she was classified as a MAS-present woman.

Digit Span (Backwards) was used as the performance task because performance decreases with increases in state-anxiety (Hodges and Spielberger, 1969). All 14 series of numbers from the Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale were used (Wechsler, 1958).

Procedure. In both experiments motive to avoid success was assessed using the traditional TAT instructions. After randomly assigning instructions to the groups, subjects were administered either Difficult or Easy Instructions in Experiment I and Internal or External Locus-of-Control Instructions in Experiment II. The two sets of Instructions were:

Difficult/Easy Instructions

> The second part of the experiment is concerned with ability. The task you will be doing may look easy -- but it's not/and it is. The task measures such things as attention, control, and perceptual acuity -- attributes which are important for many kinds of tasks or problems. While the task may be difficult/easy that doesn't mean that it's impossible/simple. The task has been used before and each

time the performance of subjects like yourselves is quite variable. That is, some do quite well and others perform poorly. That's good reason for doing your best. You are, of course, competing with one another.

Internal/External Locus of Control Instructions

The second part of the experiment is concerned with ability. The task you will be doing measures such things as attention, control, and perceptual acuity -- attributes which are important for many kinds of tasks or problems. One interesting thing about this task is that success is a matter of effort and ability -- there is little room for chance or luck/is sometimes a matter of luck or chance -- rather than effort and ability. Your score on this task is a reflection of your ability and perserverance/is not always a reflection of your ability and perserverance in the usual competitive situations. Doing poorly or well cannot/can be attributed to misfortune or accident. This task has been used before and each time the performance of subjects like yourselves is quite variable. That is, some do quite well and others perform poorly. That's good reason for doing your best. You are, of course, competing with one another.

After instructions, all subjects were given Digit Span (Backwards) with standard instructions for adminstration, except that subjects recorded their answers on paper rather than orally. The Experimenters carefully monitored all subjects, in groups of 10-12, and recorded any subject who cheated by writing the numbers forward beginning with the last blank. Subjects were then debriefed and dismissed.

Results

As predicted in both Experiment I and II, the interactions between absence or presence of the motive to avoid success and instructions were significant (F = 14.51, df = 1/54, $p < .001$; F = 6.70, df = 1/53, $p < .05$). There were no main effects for motive to avoid success or instructions in either experiment.

Insert Table 1 and Table 2 About Here

Discussion

As predicted, MAS-absent women performed better following Difficult and Internal-Control Instructions and MAS-present women performed better following Easy or External-Control Instructions. The major thesis of the research was therefore supported. For the MAS-present women it may simply have been less threatening to be successful on a task which was easy or affected by chance, i.e., tasks which were not personally significant. Within these moderating factors, they could succeed. The MAS-absent women, however, (perhaps operating more simply in terms of no achievement motivation) achieved best in significant situations, where competition was either highly demanding and/or highly reflective of their ability and effort. (Parenthetically, it is unfortunate that the assessment of achievement motivation in women is confounded with the motive to avoid success, and its independent assessment is questionable (Horner, 1968). The results suggest that the theory of the motive to avoid success predicts the performance of MAS-present women but does not, in a simple manner, predict the performance of MAS-absent women. Indeed, they too approach success selectively.

If the motive to avoid success can be characterized as specialized anxiety (arousal) which will affect performance, the inverted-U function (Hebb, 1955) which depicts the relationship between arousal level and performance may adequately describe these findings. Moderate arousal facilitates performance. Therefore maximal performance from the MAS-present women, who are likely to be highly anxious in a challenging situation, is achieved by reducing the arousal, i.e. going from high to moderate arousal. MAS-absent women may be less anxious and a good challenge might increase arousal from low to moderate, thereby achieving an arousal level which maximizes performance. Of course, as Horner (1968) has pointed out, most testing environments are competitive, challenging and personally important. The MAS-present women is therefore at a disadvantage in spite of her ability.

Feather and Simon's (1973) research on the attribution of locus of control variables as a function of the presence or absence of the motive to avoid success and success or failure in performance provides an illuminating counterpoint to the present study. Feather and Simon asked male and female subjects to attribute their success or failure (self-selected), after the fact. MAS-absent subjects were more likely and MAS-present subjects less likely to attribute success to external factors, such as task difficulty or luck. Since Horner (1968) suggested and Gross and Detterbeck (1972)demonstrated that MAS-present women are brighter (verbally, at least) than MAS-absent women, the MAS-present women may account for their expected success with undue modesty. They assume personal responsibility for success, as Feather and Simon suggest, by implication rather than directly. While success may not

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have been due to ability or effort, it certainly wasn't due to the ease of the task or to luck. Perhaps this circuitous attribution mitigates the negative consequences of success. Attributions of this sort were unreasonable in Experiment II of the present study. At the outset of the experiment, the instructions make it quite clear whether success or failure was due to internal or external factors. Therefore, anxiety-reducing rationes were unavailable to the MAS-present woman. As a result, Internal-Control instructions negatively affected her performance.

Future research should extend the research to male and female subjects and focus on the subject's attribution of possible success prior to competition, during competion, and/or prior to knowledge of the results. Many questions are left to be investigated, including whether the MAS-present subjects' attributions of success, as identified by Feather and Simon (1973), serves an adaptive function in terms of performance or in terms of self-concept and including the identification of additional factors which impair and enhance the performance of MAS-present and MAS-absent women.

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Summary

The motive to avoid success has been conceptualized as an ambivalence in life-goal directions, particularly characteristic of white college women. The presence or absence of the motive to avoid success was found to interact significantly with two experimental sets of instructions: Difficult vs. Easy (Esperiment I) and Internal vs. External Locus-of-Control (Experiment II). Women exhibiting the motive to avoid success performed better on Digit Span (Backwards) following Easy and External-Control Instructions while women not exhibiting the motive to avoid success performed better following Difficult and Internal-Control Instructions.

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Footnotes

[1]The research was conducted while the author was at the University of Nebraska - Lincoln. Special thanks are due to Amy Boehmer and Shelley Stall for conducting the experimental and to Robert C. Beck for critically reading an early draft of the manuscript.

[2]An abbreviated report of this research was presented at the annual meetings of the American Psychological Association, New Orleans, La., 1974.

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Table 1

Means, Standard Deviations, and Cell Sizes of Digit Span Backwards Scores in Experiment I as a function of Presence or Absence of Motive to Avoid Success and Easy or Difficult Instructions.

		Instructions	
		Difficult	Easy
MAS-present women	$\bar{X}$	8.19	10.00
	SD	2.69	2.68
	N	16	13
MAS-absent women	$\bar{X}$	9.86	7.07
	SD	1.46	2.09
	N	14	15

Table 2

Means, Standard Deviations, and Cell Sizes of Digit Span Backwards Scores in Experiment II as a function of Presence or Absence of Motive to Avoid Success and Internal or External.

		Locus of Control Instructions	
		Internal	External
MAS-present	$\bar{X}$	7.67	9.30
	SD	2.75	2.50
	N	13	10
MAS-absent women	$\bar{X}$	10.00	8.44
	SD	1.78	2.13
	N	18	16

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